The Christian News-Letter

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EASTER, 1948

A CHRISTIAN CONTACT GROUP

THE C.N-L. IN GERMANY

SUPPLEMENT

BEING AND DYING
BY
GEORGE EVERY, S.S.M.

ON 2ND FEBRUARY a remarkable meeting took place in Prague. It was attended and addressed by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Prague, the Lutheran Bishop of Slovakia and representatives of the Czech Brethren, the Reformed Church in Slovakia, the Moravian Church, the Orthodox Church, the Old Catholics, the Czechoslovak Church, Congregationalists, Baptists and Methodists. The purpose of the meeting was to present a jointly prepared and accepted appeal from all the Christian Churches in Czechoslovakia for peace in the world. The meeting was crowded and a thousand people stood in the rain in the park outside and heard the addresses broadcast. In the audience and on the platform were members of the Cabinet and of the Czech Parliament, representatives of many Councils and of the University, and of the British and Russian Embassies. After the meeting all the addresses were broadcast to the nation in a programme lasting an hour. It is neither necessary nor possible to reproduce the whole appeal. Read in the light of recent events it is profoundly moving. We will give a summary of its main points. It begins in this fashion :—

" Here, in the heart of Europe, we experience more than other nations the conflicts and interpenetrations of contemporary ideological, social, cultural and political systems. We thank God that we, here in this place, this highly exposed spot in the world, are able to express our attitude

towards them, not only as citizens of a free Republic, but also as members of the human family, and above all as Christians, assured of human, civil, political and religious freedom."

The statement goes on to outline the main features of the international situation. The world is falling apart into two political groups, and a situation is developing which makes war a grim possibility. Now is the time to call to remembrance the fact that " the recent war was fought not only as a negative rejection of a system menacing humanity, but also as an expression of an ideal common to all, the ideal of assuring a full life to individuals, to nations and to humanity ". It is, therefore, the task of the Church to call to remembrance these ideals before they are swept away.

Turning first to the Czechoslovak people, the leaders of the Churches ask every citizen to remember that " every one of our actions in private and even more in public life is capable of either destroying or heightening suspicion among the nations, and loyalty to truth is the primary duty of all ".

Turning then to Christians in all nations, they say that the Christians have to bear considerable guilt for the confusion of the world to-day, because they " have frequently displayed greater loyalty to the interests of their times than to eternal principles ". They have a peculiar responsibility towards millions of young people " who are asking themselves painfully whether their preparation for life has any sense at all when their very existence is threatened ". The greatest temptation open to a Christian in this matter of world peace is the temptation to think that " since his strength or influence is not adequate to overcome evil, he cannot do anything about it ". His duty is not to ask whether he can do anything effective, but whether he can do the will of God.

The last section of the appeal is addressed to statesmen. Church leaders, it says, have no illusions about the anguish which grips the hearts of men throughout the world as they realistically face the yawning gulf of estrangement which divides one half of mankind from the other. The wounds

of the last war years are still unhealed and yet already men are compelled to contemplate the possibility of an even more terrible catastrophe. Nothing that statesmen can do for mankind in any way compares with their efforts to secure peace and in those efforts they will receive the prayers and the service of the Churches.

There are two reasons to account for the wide publicity given to this appeal in Czechoslovakia. Even among those outside the Churches the first appearance of the leaders of all the Churches in Czechoslovakia on a common platform evoked comment, some sincere and some patronizing. Within the Churches there was unfeigned rejoicing that this step towards understanding and communication between Churches so long and often so bitterly divided had been taken. The other reason for the wide comment was that the Churches had taken up and expressed the deepest longing of men, not only in Czechoslovakia, but the world over, the longing for deliverance from the fear of a third world war.

The frail bridge between East and West on which the framers of this appeal stood and knew themselves to be standing, is now swept away. The swiftness and thoroughness with which the Communists have taken control in Czechoslovakia has no doubt contributed to the speed with which action on a Western Union of democratic Powers and on the future of Western Germany has been taken at Brussels. The events in Czechoslovakia have changed the content of men's fears : swift, silent capture of power from within without exchange of blows may bring about the same effect as conquest from without. A year hence we in this country may look back and see that Western Europe stands at this present moment where these Czechoslovak churchmen stood two months ago.

" I have always been an optimist," writes a C.N-L. reader who has given a long life to battling for good causes, " but I confess I am beginning to feel very blue inside. . . . It 's a grim world and I find it hard not to feel discouraged." If we are honest we must all admit that we feel more than a little " blue inside ". Cheerful assurances that things may not be as bad as they look fall on deaf ears : we all know in our

hearts that they *are* as bad as they look and may be worse. But for Christians who take their profession seriously there is another task than that of trying to wring comfort or sense from the things of the immediate now, which assault their ears from the radio and their eyes from the newspaper headlines. The meaning of what is happening in the world is not for them to be found by feverishly overtaking the events of the last few minutes, nor is comfort or courage to be drawn from a determination in some way to live the future before it comes. Instead, life takes its meaning from the terrible events in Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago which in this coming week we rehearse in our minds, and from the stern and awful words spoken then which burn themselves upon our consciousness. Easter came not to a cheerful party of men determined to look on the bright side, but to men who had faced and accepted the unalterable finality of death. To the modern mind the idea of accepting suffering and death, the whole conception of centring one's life upon a *passion* is morbid, sentimental and repugnant. Perhaps it may be that in the events of our time God is compelling us to face suffering and death as inescapable factors in human life, in order that we may learn again that, for the Church, to be reduced to a point where there is nothing to do except endure and suffer, is not to reach the end of action, but to discover the beginning of redemption.

Christians, like all other men, are conscious that life can be darkened by fear of what the future may bring. Anxiety about the morrow has been part of the human lot throughout man's history. It is a part of the equipment by which man wards off death and disaster that he can think and plan ahead. There have been few times in history when for the great majority of men the future has not held some kind of threat. The new fact about our time is that to-day millions of people in Europe face the possibility of disaster without the belief in eternal life, without either the faith that here and now, no matter what happens to the body, life in God is possible, and without the hope that beyond history comes the judgment of history and the vindication of the right by the judgment of God. For such men the only two dimensions of life are

the present and the future and when the future is dark there is nothing in life to hope for, nothing to give the present meaning and worth. Christians have often in recent days been chivied from the proclamation of eternal life by the accusation continually hurled against the Church (and not always without justification) that the Church made her preaching about man's eternal destiny an excuse for not caring about social justice here and now. To some extent the Church herself has been corrupted by modern pre-occupation with the future—much of the talking and writing about the Kingdom of God after the first world war was tinged by this outlook, so much so that the very phrase itself, to be found on nearly every page of the synoptic gospels, is hardly heard in Christian preaching to-day for fear of misinterpretation. Everybody wants to hear a word of hope and takes it for granted that it must be about the future. Whether the Church's word of hope, which has little or nothing to do with the future (for that lies in the hand of God) can be heard or not depends largely on how far Christians clearly show that they are living as though eternal life was more important to them than anything of good or ill that the future could hold.

A CHRISTIAN CONTACT GROUP

C.N-L. readers often express a liking for news of what others are doing not so much in spectacular ways as in ordinary situations. Here is a letter from the secretary of a Christian contact group formed in a church congregation in December, 1945 :—

" We are first and foremost a Church group, though anyone is welcome to take part in our discussions. Our stated aim is : ' An effort to discover the special meaning of the Christian ethic in the modern world, and how a Church group can best attempt its practical application.'

" We find that the practice of our aim falls naturally into two parts—first, within the church, and secondly outside the church. On the first we have held a series of discussions on Church problems, which have mostly been concerned with the training of young people, at which we have had fairly

frank statements by the young people themselves. The outcome of these discussions was the formation of a Youth Committee to co-ordinate all youth work within the church, and its chairman is the senior church officer.

" It is in the work outside the church that the group has best lived up to its name of Christian Contact. Some subjects for discussion have been : Who is our neighbour ?—the attitude of the church to its neighbours—local government—Christianity and politics—the history of our church and its influence on local life—an account of the work of the Council of Social Service—two visits from German prisoners of war—Federal Union—the World Conference at Oslo.

" The practical results of the discussions have been :—

1. That the group has become affiliated to the Council of Social Service, enabling it to take its full part in the social life of the town.

2. Attendance of at least two of our members at each of the council meetings during the past year.

3. Two of our members are voluntarily assisting the almoner of our local hospital in her work with ex-patients. This work is literally ' going about doing good ' and gives great happiness to the group.

4. We have arranged for between thirty and forty local people to send used periodicals to English-speaking Germans.

" The Christian News-Letter has been an inspiration. It is good to know that other people are tackling the same problems as we are doing, and to learn how they are going about it."

THE C.N-L. IN GERMANY

At Christmas time we invited readers to send us gift subscriptions to the C.N-L. to be sent to the continent. About a hundred readers sent such gifts and all the subscriptions have now been allotted. Some have gone to

France, Holland and Scandinavia; but the need is greatest in Germany, since it is impossible for Germans to send us money. In most cases we have been able to put donors and recipients in touch with each other. Amongst those who are receiving the C.N-L. in this way are Church leaders, a considerable number of teachers in state schools, university teachers and business and professional men. We receive constant evidence that copies of the News-Letter pass through many hands and are eagerly read. Here is a letter which was not written to the News-Letter office, nor with any idea that it would find its way here. It is from a young German to an English friend: "I would like to tell you of an experience I had. A lady sat beside me in the train and produced some reading stuff from her bag. An occasional glance made me alert—why, this seemed to be the C.N-L.! Then she turned it round and indeed, so it was. I could not help but strike up a talk right away and then we found enough to talk on for four hours. It would fill many pages to write all we talked about. I think I have never spoken with a casual travelling acquaintance for four hours in my life. She studies the Christian News-Letter with equal interest as I do. How excellent is 'Some remarks on the relations of science and religion', by Michael Foster! Really modern man is eradicated from social environment and traditional culture, and needs all the more spiritual guidance. You see it in Germany perhaps more than anywhere that this is true."

THE SUPPLEMENT

The correspondence which flows into the News-Letter office gives a clear indication of the wide variety of point of view and experience among News-Letter readers. "C.N-L. No. 306 really seems to me to touch a new high water mark. It is magnificent," writes one. Another writes on a postcard, "This last, No. 306, is quite nauseous in both sections," and another says, "I have been a recipient of the News-Letter for some three years now, but have never yet put pen to paper in comment. I feel, however, that I must express my feelings on the contribution by

Dr. George MacLeod." He expresses strong disagreement with Dr. MacLeod on the ground that " the religion of the Incarnation has sanctified the material (of the Creeds) for all time." One or two readers draw attention to a small book which in any case would have had mention in this News-Letter. It is called *The Bible and Modern Scholarship* [1] and is written by Sir Frederick Kenyon, a distinguished archaeologist and one-time Director of the British Museum. It is the work of a man who while not a theologian has a comprehensive knowledge of the development of biblical criticism. It is just the book to lend to the layman who has read Bishop Barnes and does not know where to find a reply. A reply to Bishop Barnes on more strictly theological grounds was produced by Professor C. H. Dodd a year ago in his *Christian Beginnings*.[2]

But another C.N-L. reader says, " I would cheerfully swop all the works of Albert Schweitzer for Eliot's *Four Quartets*. My approach to religion is through the language of poetry and symbolism." We would hasten to add that this reader is not a university don, but a busy industrialist. We are conscious that the News-Letter takes too little notice of the service of the arts to religion and that those who share this reader's point of view seldom see it reflected in our pages.

Brother George Every, who is a lay brother of the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham, has long made modern literature and more especially the work of the younger poets, a special subject of study. He wrote a little book called *Christian Discrimination*, which was published in the series of C.N-L. books.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

[1] John Murray, 3s. 6d.

[2] Epworth Press, 6d.

BEING AND DYING

By GEORGE EVERY, S.S.M.

I DO not think that anyone would deny that writers and critics of imaginative literature have played a larger part than theologians, philosophers, and men of science, in the formation of what may be called an English mind, a common philosophy of life held and accepted by most serious English men and women in a particular generation. The so-called scientific outlook, considered as such a philosophy, owes more to Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, and Bernard Shaw than to Lord Russell or to the scientists themselves. Matthew Arnold, Browning and George Eliot did more to form the mind of the Victorians than John Stuart Mill or Herbert Spencer. To go further back, we find the spirit of the eighteenth century in the essays of Addison and the verse of Alexander Pope, rather than in Locke's treatise on the human understanding or in the philosophical works of Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury. In France on the other hand, the tradition of philosophical pamphleteering goes back into the seventeenth and even into the sixteenth century. Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Existentialisme est une humanisme* belongs to a recognized genre in French literature, with the *Maximes* of La Rochefoucauld and the *Pensées* of Pascal, the works of Voltaire and Rousseau. Sartre himself, like Matthieu Delarue, the chief character in his long novel, *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, taught philosophy at a lycée, an ordinary secondary school. The place of philosophy in French, Italian, and German education accounts for much that we find puzzling in the wide interest aroused by existentialism on the Continent. We cannot easily imagine a similar excitement about philosophy in England.

Those who are most interested in continental existentialism welcome it chiefly out of anxiety lest Britain should lose touch with intellectual developments in Europe. This emphasis seems to me unfortunate because it obscures our

own contribution to the movement, which I believe we could make more effectively if we realized that on the literary side it has already been well begun, though philosophy lags behind. In some sense the imaginative writer is always existentialist in that the philosophy of life implied in his art is never independent of a decision of the whole person to take this and not that for truth. He cannot confine himself to that kind of knowledge that is wholly or almost wholly independent of the disposition of the observer. But in an age when the prestige of mathematical and mechanical science stands high, literature and art will so far enter into the spirit of the age that novelists, painters, and even poets will disguise their vision from themselves in terms of a description of the outward appearance of things that approximates as closely as possible to a scientific, historical account of a " slice of life ". So we have in painting such careful documentation as Frith's picture of " Derby Day ", and in fiction the novels of Anthony Trollope. Most Victorian novels read like biography with exceptions due to the genius of Dickens, who could endow imaginative creations with a vitality that made them immediately convincing, even to those who demanded likeness to life in every respect. Even poetry aspired " to the condition of the novel " in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Ring and the Book*. But directly the supremacy of physical science over the imagination was ever so slightly relaxed, the arts swung back into another way of interpreting experience, not without exaggeration from the mere force of reaction. In France this reaction has been mainly observed in painting, in England in literature, always our national art.

English novelists and poets who in the last twenty-five years have engaged in the struggle to find and express an interpretation of their experience of life in which their whole being shall be committed, seem to me to fall into three groups, very much as the existential philosophers do. First of all there are those who believe that the universe as a whole has no meaning of its own. Any meaning that we find in it we have put there ourselves. We are responsible for shaping the world in which we will to think and act.

Some such philosophy seems to issue from the psychological interpretation of the varieties, not only of religious, but of all other experience, that has been thrust upon us by the various schools of psycho-analysts far more ruthlessly than by William James.

A second group would hold that there is a meaning with which man is inevitably engaged, a whole truth that lies behind all philosophies and all religions, but that to us at least, in this age, the meaning must remain enigmatic and dark, a paradox with which we must wrestle, without ever being able to come to terms. Such a philosophy of life underlies the extraordinary novels of the Sudeten-German Jew, Franz Kafka, translated into English by Edwin and Willa Muir. A version of the same philosophy, lacking perhaps just that sharp cutting edge of direct experience that makes Kafka's dilemma so convincing, is presented to the English public in the novels of Rex Warner, now in a library edition. D. H. Lawrence, writing of " the dark gods " had a similar meaning ; and I find the same struggle with darkness in the last poems of the very best of our war poets, Sidney Keyes, killed in Africa in 1943.

The third kind of existentialist accepts the reality of a revelation, believing that however dark and puzzling the world must be as we see it from our side, God has come to meet us. All engagement with the whole of our experience, all committal to the storms of the world, is a committal of our souls into His hands,

> " The awful daring of a moment's surrender
> Which an age of prudence can never retract
> By this, and this only, we have existed."

T. S. Eliot wrote these lines in 1922, some years before he was consciously a Christian. Those who are interested in the history of words will notice that he already used the verb " exist " in Kierkegaard's sense. Another Christian poet and novelist who before 1930 was already concerned with different whole responses to experience was Charles Williams. His " spiritual thrillers ", like those of Kafka

and Rex Warner, successfully defied accepted standards of verisimilitude, although they contain good and evil miracles quite outside the bounds of ordinary experience in the twentieth century. They have opened the way for the interplanetary romances of Mr. C. S. Lewis and for the kind of direct approach to the struggle of good and evil in individual human souls that we find in the novels of Graham Greene.

In these three groups I see approximate equivalents to the atheistic existentialists in France, to the German philosopher Heidegger, and to such Christian existentialists as Berdyaev and Marcel. In a recent account of a visit to Heidegger in *The Listener* for January 29th, Mr. Schimanski explained that when Heidegger speaks of " the absence of God " he does not intend to deny, as Sartre and Camus do, God's existence. His anguish is that he cannot affirm it. The distinction that he wishes to draw between himself and Sartre seems to me to correspond to the vitally important difference between Sidney Keyes, who wrote of Christ,

" We are dying to-night, you in the aged darkness
And I in the white room my pride has rented.
And either way, we have to die alone.
The laid table stands hard and white as to-morrow
The lamp sings. The West wind jostles the door.
Though broken the bread, the brain, the brave body
There cannot now be any hope of changing
The leavings to living bone, the bone to bread :
For bladed centuries are drawn between us.
The room is ready, but the guest is dead."

and such a " Personalist " as Dr. Alex Comfort, who takes as his major premiss that :—

" The particular qualities which make up humanness—mind, purpose, consciousness, will, personality . . . are so far in conflict with the physical conditions in which man exists that they are irrelevant to the general structure of physical reality."

To Dr. Comfort :—

" At the present time, one of the main human refuges in the past (the negation of death) is apparently sealed by scientific research. I say apparently, because the important factor from the point of view of social psychology is not the actual evidence, but the acceptance of death as real and final by a high proportion of the populations which have so far evaded the realization."

But to Keyes, as I understand his poetry, there is still something to explore.

This matter of an attitude to death is central. As Yeats has said :—

> " Nor dread nor hope attend
> A dying animal ;
> A man awaits his end
> Dreading and hoping all."

In so far as we neither dread nor hope we are among " those unfortunates, who never were alive ", who haunt T. S. Eliot's poetry from the third canto of Dante's *Inferno* (" I had not thought death had undone so many "). Like Doris in *Sweeney Agonistes*, we reply to a life made up of " birth, copulation, and death " :—

> " That 's not life, that 's no life
> Why I'd just as soon be dead "

to which the only possible answer is Sweeney's " Life is death ". Later, in his most mature verse, Mr. Eliot wrote the line " (And the time of death is every moment)". Our response to death, and so to life, must govern our whole lives, if it is to " fructify in the lives of others ". But it was perhaps inevitable that some people should misunderstand him. Accusations of " rejection of life " and " a negative attitude to sex ", which can be refuted from his earlier and later poetry, have some force when directed, as they generally are in reality, against his influence on others. Pascal, Kierkegaard, and T. S. Eliot attract the sceptical by their desperate honesty, but they demand of their readers a

response to life that can only be given in the Holy Ghost, and not by nature. Where the resources of the Christian faith are not available, response is inhibited, and the sensitive reader may be convinced that he is less than a man, yet still believe that the kind of " existence " that these Christians enjoy is for him impossible, even undesirable. If, as I suspect, such novelists as Bernanos and Mauriac have a like effect on young Frenchmen, the atheistic existentialism of Sartre and Albert Camus may be for them a way out of the difficulty of not being a Christian in an intellectual and literary atmosphere where the Christians have recovered a primacy in initiative.

In England as well as in France young writers and readers of poetry have been forced to face the problem of their attitude to death by such writers as Eliot, Lawrence and Yeats whether they have no belief in immortality, or whether they find their belief so vague and dim that no image of the after-life can be brought to mind. Dr. Comfort, in the book already quoted,[1] speaks of " the awareness of death, the quasi-priestly, but secular attitude " as " omnipresent for anyone who knows contemporary English art and letters ". This coincides with my own observation from a very different point of view.

In some of Dr. Comfort's own poems death is crushing and melting the individual human soul :—

> " The candle's flesh is white, the flesh of a girl
> melting into time, weeping white coins. Below
> the stone, those who were listening, for nine days
> heard crying. Every day they came again
> until grass hid the edges of the grave."[2]

In others he extracts a grim, stoical satisfaction from his situation :—

> " because the stars have for us no earnest of living
> because there is no resurrection
> because all things are against us, we are ourselves."[3]

[1] *Art and Social Responsibility*, Falcon Press, 1946.
[2] In *Elegies*, Routledge, 1944.
[3] In *The Signal to Engage*, Routledge, 1947.

Sidney Keyes on the other hand faced love and death in the mood of an explorer :—

" All who would save their life must find the desert—
The lover, the poet, the girl who dreams of Christ,
And the swift runner, crowned with another laurel :
They all must face the sun, the red rock desert,
And see the burning of the metal bird

. . . . . .

We do not know the end, we cannot tell
That valley's shape, nor whether the white fire
Will blind us instantly." [1]

For Keyes this experience was inescapable. Others, it seems to me, have done violence to their souls by deliberately seeking darkness. It is true that we do not know much about the after-life, or about the future of our world. It is not true that the world beyond death, or beyond whatever end must eventually come to this world, is outside the sphere of good and evil.

" The quiet is what endures. The swifts fly higher
Through the drifting ash of the last light
Into the nights of the future. And all we now believe
Still will be true when the sky is wild with fire." [2]

This quiet turns on belief that what we know of human good here and now is not destined to be annihilated, or to be fused with spirit and matter where they " meet and, in some explosion and combustion awe-ful as that of Hiroshima, become one world ". Our human nature has been taken up into God in Christ, and in His life persists ; and we in Him shall find our true being.

I know no modern image of the relevance of the resurrection as vivid as that provided by W. B. Yeats, who did not believe in it, when in his play *Resurrection* he made the Greek leap at the figure of Christ passing across the room, and cry

" The heart of a phantom is beating !
The heart of a phantom is beating ! "

A beating heart, no shadow, had risen again.

[1] In *Collected Poems*, ed. by Michael Meyer, Routledge, 1945.
[2] " For St. James, 1943 ", by Norman Nicholson, in *Five Rivers*, Faber, 1944.

But I can think of two resurrection appearances presented to our condition by Christian poets in our own time. One is the resurrection of the martyred Christians at the end of *The House of the Octopus*, a missionary play written by Charles Williams at the very end of his life, and performed only after his death in 1945. The other is the restoration of the widow's son by Elijah in *The Old Man of the Mountains*, a modern version of the story told by Norman Nicholson in a setting in the dales of Cumberland. There

" life

Beyond my experience and beyond my comprehension "

involves all, and more than all, the rich vitality of physical health. The boy returns ready " to climb Carmel Fell to-morrow ", no longer

" To stay about my house like a wounded sparrow."

The life of the spirit is not an escape from the physical, but a transfiguration of the physical.

This needs translation into physical terms. We do well to criticize severely such sketches as those of Mr. C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, but he is doing a great and necessary business ; for the alternative to a Christian eschatology is now no longer no eschatology at all, but some form of nihilism ; either a nihilism of the skull, the spectre, and the bones, proclaiming that life is essentially a descent into nothingness, " emptiness, absence, the void ", or, more probably, some other kind of demonic worship of darkness, reviving old and forgotten religions.

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